WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT SUSTAINING OUR COMMON FUTURE

"Women are the world's farmers: they grow the crops, tend the animals, bring in the water. [Yet] international agencies and Governments have everywhere ignored the vital part women play in caring for the environment. Their voice, like their knowledge and experience, is simply not heard."

These words of Victoria Chitepo, Zimbabwe's Minister of Natural Resources, underline the deep links between women and the environment. She was addressing the first African Women's Assembly on Women and Sustainable Development, held in February 1989 in Harare, Zimbabwe.

In the industrial countries, women have greatly contributed to making the environment a central issue. Since the 1970s, women's groups and organizations have been very active in promoting environmental awareness, education and protection. Women make up a large part of Western Europe's Green parties, both as members and as party leaders.

All over the developing world, women play a crucial role in environmental management. As farmers, stock breeders, suppliers of fuel and water, they interact most closely with the environment. They are the managers—and often the preservers—of natural resources.

First, women affect the environment as farmers. Women make up a large share—if not the majority—of farmers in the developing world. According to a United Nations estimate, they account for over half the food produced in developing countries, and for more than three fourths of the family food supply in Africa.

In many developing countries, men migrate to the cities in search of jobs, leaving women in charge of the farms. As many as one third of rural households are headed by women, according to a study of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Thus women are increasingly making decisions—on production, land use, fertilizers, pesticides—that affect the environment in many ways.

Women are not only land managers, but innovators in crop use and monitors of plant species, a 1986 World Bank study indicates.

Women are equally important in water management. Making up a large share of farmers, women are primary users of water in agriculture. In rural areas, women are also the main collectors and users of water for their household. They are immediately affected by degraded water systems, and have a vital interest in good water quality. Their role in watershed protection and in water quality are the key to water ecological systems, a United Nations study says.

The same is true in the management of trees and forests. In many societies, women are responsible for the care and maintenance of trees. They are also the main gatherers of fuelwood for heating and cooking. For women, forests are an important resource in many ways. They provide fodder, medicinal plants, wild fruits, and raw materials for mats, baskets, ropes and fences. As major users of forests, women are well aware of their value, and of the need to limit the rate of exploitation below regeneration capacity.

Women have another strong link with the environment. In various developing regions, population pressure contributes to environmental degra lation, putting unprecedented strains on natural resources. In many areas, population pressure is depleting natural resources faster than they can be regenerated.

The population factor puts a similar burden on women. High fertility rates often mean high infant and child mortality, poor health, malnutrition, and heavy domestic chores.

Here women's role is again paramount. Improvements in their status are a crucial factor in bringing down family size. Data from all over the world show that as female education, health, employment

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and legal rights improve, birth rates decline. Any programme bettering the situation of women will lead to lower birth rates and lower pressure on the environment.

MANAGERS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS

This complex link with the environment helps to explain the high number of environmental projects started by women all over the developing world. Women have a strong awareness of environmental deterioration and the need for conservation.

In many rural areas, women have taken the initiative in ensuring an adequate supply of water. Kenyan women started in 1977 a water-for-health programme which has supported over 80 community water projects. In Malawi, women help ensure all over the country the maintenance of some 8,000 handpumps.

Women are also taking care of reforestation. In Zimbabwe, the Association of Women's Club is carrying out in many areas tree-planting projects, using drought-resistant trees. Kenya's Green Belt Movement—a project of Kenya's Council of Women—is a grass-roots tree-planting movement rooted in the local communities, where women and young people set up nurseries and supervise the planting and care of the seedlings. Today some 670 tree nurseries are producing millions of seedlings.

India's Chipko movement is a prime example of women acting to prevent destruction of their resources. In 1973, angered by the selling of their trees to a timber company, women of Uttar Pradesh State protected them through non-violent action: as the company prepared to fell trees above their village, the women rushed to the woods and hugged the trees, protecting them with their bodies. Chipko has since become a major environmental force. Today Chipko's women plant trees, build soil retainer walls and draw up village forest plans.

Similar movements are active in Brazil, Nepal, the Philippines and many other countries. Women's action is not confined to reforestation: it extends to promoting community agriculture and encouraging the efficient use of biomass fuel.

But too often environmental projects tend to overlook women. "Today top-down approaches often negate local women's knowledge and capabilities", says Shimwaayi Mutemba, Executive Director of the Nairobi-based Environment Liaison Centre. Yet the solution to environmental problems may lie in the empowerment of women, she says.

Governments and development agencies are increasingly aware that women must be involved in planning and carrying out environmental projects. Successful programmes concerning the environment have women at their centre, stresses the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). FAO points out that women's central role in managing natural resources must be recognized by policy makers if policy is to accomplish its objective of environmentally sound development.

Various United Nations agencies are supporting environmental projects carried out by women. Among them are the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, FAO and UNFPA.

MORE VULNERABLE TO CONTAMINANTS...

Women are more vulnerable than men to environmental contaminants, because of their capacity to bear children. Many reports have linked reproductive defects to contaminants such as lead, says a United Nations study. With the increase in the number of chemicals—some 70,000 chemical products are today on the market, and some 1,000 new ones enter the market each year—the impact on women and infants appears to be on the increase as well. The possible effects of exposure to chemicals range from infertility, miscarriage, neonatal death and malformation, to growth retardation.

Birth defects now cause between 15 and 35 per cent of infant deaths in industrial countries. One fourth of the abnormalities are genetic in origin, and between 5 and 10 per cent are the product of specific agents known to cause birth defects, such as drugs, viruses, radiation and chemicals.

Contaminants also appear in human milk. Examples of chemicals known to be concentrated in human milk include pesticides and organohalides. Recent studies have shown that in some countries the daily intakes of such substances by breast-fed infants are higher than the levels considered acceptable by the World Health Organization.

. . . AND MORE ACTIVE IN PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

All over the world, women's organizations are promoting environmental awareness, education and management. Women form a large part of the membership of environmental movements. In many countries, they have been the first to lead the protest against chemical, water and air pollution.

Hundreds of women's groups are active in environmental issues the world over. In the Soviet Union, thousands of women are involved in a world-wide movement called Bambi, a children's ecological and ethical movement which is working to increase youth awareness of environmental issues. In the United States, the League of Women Voters has been a pioneer in forcing national action against water pollution. In the Federal Republic of Germany, women leaders have played a key role in the emergence of the Green Party.

Internationally, women have set up WorldWIDE (World Women Dedicated to the Environment), an organization promoting the involvement of women in environmental management. Based in Washington, D.C., United States, and with members in some 50 countries, WorldWIDE works to make political leaders and the public more aware of environmental issues, to enhance women's influence in environmental organizations, and to increase the inclusion of women in development policies and programmes.

The United Nations Environment Programme established in 1985 the Senior Women's Advisory Group on Sustainable Development (SWAG), made up of women in leadership positions from 19 nations. SWAG members include Zimbabwean Minister Victoria Chitepo, former French Health Minister Simone Veil, United States Congresswoman Claudine Schneider, Hungarian columnist Eva Szilagyi, and Egyptian Senator Shafika Nasser. The Group has been increasingly involved in international action.

SWAG organized the African Women's Assembly on Women and Sustainable Development, held in Harare in 1989. The Assembly, attended by 160 women from 20 African countries, made recommendations on managing seas, rivers and lake basins, forests and woodlands, deserts and arid lands.

In February 1990 a similar assembly, the Women and Environment Roundtable, was held in Tunis, Tunisia, for the Arab region. Women's assemblies on environment and development for the Asian and Latin American regions are scheduled for later this year.

Plans are under way for a Global Assembly in 1991, which would address climate change, chemical and hazardous waste, water systems, biological diversity and other issues. It will bring together women working for the environment in various capacities—ministers, members of parliament, heads of national environmental councils, members of non-governmental organizations and environmental experts. The Assembly will adopt strategies for specific environmental action by all levels of society.

These and similar activities are expected to influence the forthcoming United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, to be held in Brazil in June 1992. The Conference will provide a major opportunity to acknowledge women's vital role in sustaining our common future.

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